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Sustainability of Musical Heritage Transmission among Young Mah Meri Musicians in Malaysia through Shared Agency as Culturally Responsive Methodology

Kelestarian Transmisi Warisan Muzik di kalangan Pemuzik Muda Mah Meri di Malaysia Melayu AgensiBersama sebagai Metodologi Responsif Budaya

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ABSTRACT

In decolonizing research methodologies, a collaborative team comprising the Mah Meri culture bearers and the music researchers, navigated the principles of Applied Ethnomusicology and Culturally Responsive Methodology (CRM) in musical heritage transmission workshops for ten young Mah Meri musicians aged eight to fifteen. Several challenges emerged including fostering a sense of "ownership" and interest in singing traditional songs inspired by a mangrove forest ecology that the younger musicians were increasingly distanced from. Further tensions aroused from the research team's limited understanding of Indigenous epistemologies and enculturation processes, difficulty of cultivating dialogic pedagogy between culture bearers and music researcher, as well as translating place-based, lifelong learning into condensed music workshop. Guided by Participatory Action Research (PAR), this paper reflects upon a non-linear cycle of action, observation, reflection, and revision involved in mobilizing CRM. We argue that developing ownership and sustaining indigenous knowledge requires embracing beyond the physical and place-based defined notions of locality to encompass the mediated virtual contemporary experiences of the young musicians today. In addition, collaborations cannot rely on reproducing an idealized or insufficiently understood notion of indigenous epistemologies. Instead, meaningful transmission requires dialogic, co-created, and reciprocal learning among researchers, culture bearers, including the young musician participants. Ultimately, this article demonstrates that sustaining musical heritage requires not only methodological flexibility but also shared agency, where knowledge transmission emerges through relationships, negotiation, and the lived realities of the community.

Keywords: Applied Ethnomusicology; Culturally Responsive Methodology; indigenous decolonizing methodology; Participatory Action Research; sustainability

ABSTRAK

Dalam usaha mendekolonisasi metodologi penyelidikan, sebuah pasukan kolaboratif yang terdiri daripada pemegang warisan budaya Mah Meri dan penyelidik muzik telah mengemudi prinsip-prinsip Etnomuzikologi Gunaan dan Metodologi Responsif Budaya (MRB) melalui bengkel transmisi warisan muzik bagi sepuluh pemuzik muda Mah Meri yang berumur antara lapan hingga lima belas tahun. Beberapa cabaran telah muncul, termasuk usaha memupuk rasa "pemilikan" dan minat untuk menyanyikan lagu-lagu tradisional yang berinspirasikan ekologi hutan paya bakau—suatu persekitaran yang semakin menjauh daripada kehidupan pemuzik muda tersebut. Ketegangan lanjut timbul berpunca daripada pemahaman pasukan penyelidik yang terhad terhadap epistemologi peribumi dan proses enkulturasi, kesukaran memupuk pedagogi dialogik antara pemegang warisan dan penyelidik muzik, serta cabaran untuk menterjemahkan pembelajaran sepanjang hayat berasaskan tempat ke dalam bentuk bengkel muzik yang padat. Berpandukan Penyelidikan Tindakan Peserta (PAR), makalah ini membincangkan kitaran tindakan, pemerhatian, refleksi, dan penyemakan secara bukan linear yang terlibat dalam menggerakkan MRB. Kami berhujah bahawa membina rasa pemilikan dan melestarikan pengetahuan peribumi memerlukan anjakan yang melangkaui tanggapan lokaliti berasaskan fizikal dan tempat semata-mata, bagi merangkumi pengalaman kontemporari maya dan bermedia pemuzik muda masa kini. Selain itu, kolaborasi tidak boleh hanya bergantung kepada penghasilan semula tanggapan epistemologi peribumi yang idealistik atau kurang difahami. Sebaliknya, transmisi yang bermakna memerlukan pembelajaran dialogik, penciptaan bersama, dan timbal balik antara penyelidik, pemegang warisan, serta peserta pemuzik muda. Akhir sekali, artikel ini menunjukkan bahawa kelestarian warisan muzik bukan sahaja memerlukan fleksibiliti metodologi tetapi juga agensi bersama (shared agency), di mana transmisi ilmu muncul melalui perhubungan, rundingan, dan realiti kehidupan komuniti tersebut.

Kata Kunci: Etnomuzikologi Gunaan, Metodologi Responsif Budaya, Metodologi dekolonisasi Peribumi, Penyelidikan Tindakan Peserta, kelestarian.

INTRODUCTION

The Mah Meri are one of 18 indigenous groups collectively known as the *Orang Asli* (*orang*: people; *asli*: original) of Malaysia (Figure 1). In 2022, Maznah Unyan, the head of the *main jo'oh* (music and dance) ensemble of the Mah Meri in Kampung Sungai Bumbun, Carey Island, invited me to collaborate with her cultural troupe, Tompoq Topoh, to transmit the main jo'oh to the children of their *opoh* (extended family). The veteran musicians of Tompoq Topoh express concern over the future of the main jo'oh, as their children show little interest in learning the art form. The older adult culture bearers were concerned over the decline of indigenous values, cultural heritage, and community solidarity in their village (Chan, 2023a, 2023b).

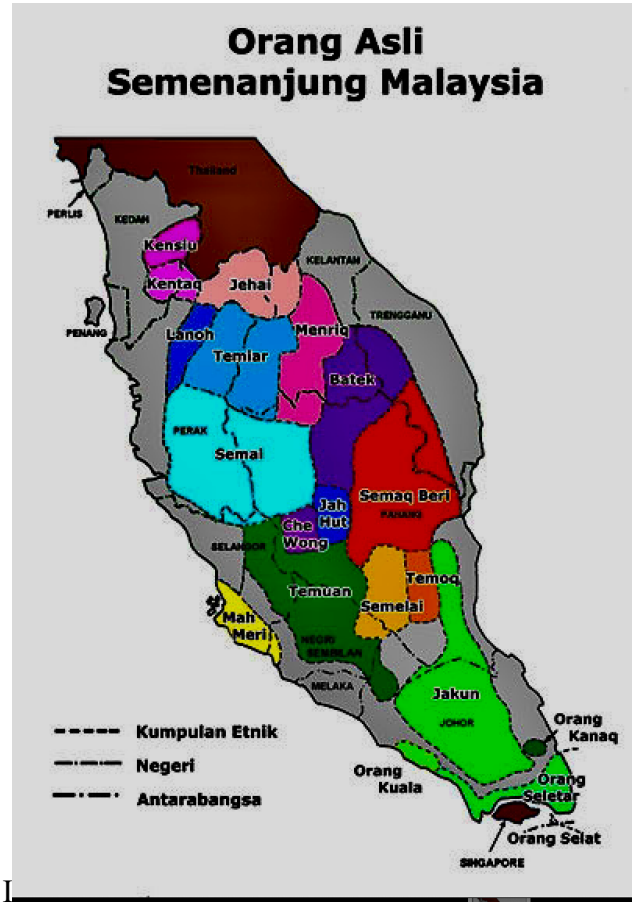

FIGURE 1. Distribution of Orang Asli groups in Malaysia (Source: Nicholas, 2000)

In establishing my positionality, I, the first author, have known the Mah Meri since 2004, when I first visited Kampung Sungai Bumbun to pursue my research interest in Orang Asli music. In 2009, I lived with the Mah Meri of Kampung Sungai Bumbun for eight months while conducting ethnographic fieldwork for my PhD thesis (Chan, 2010). Since then, I have continued to visit the Mah Meri annually, particularly during their '*Ari Moyang* celebrations. Over the past twenty years, I have developed a long-standing and close friendship with the Mah Meri culture bearers. When Maznah Unyan approached me for collaboration, I had reservations stemming from concerns that my ingrained habitus (Bourdieu, 1990, 1994) shaped by established music-education pedagogies

might introduce subconscious biases into my "teaching" approaches. In addition, my limited understanding of Indigenous music transmission methods could potentially hamper efforts to revitalize Mah Meri musical heritage. I was concerned that my research team's presence and interventions might inadvertently disrupt the culturally embedded processes of knowledge transmission rather than support them. Before addressing these issues in the problem statement, it is important to first provide background information on the Mah Meri, one of the ethnic subgroups of the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia.

BACKGROUND

According to the 2023 census, the Mah Meri population is 4,193 out of 34,308,525 people in Malaysia (JAKOA, 2023). They reside in settlements on Carey Island and along the coastal plains of Selangor. On Carey Island, there are five Mah Meri villages nestled among oil-palm estates that were once rich mangrove forest (Chan, 2010, 2023a, 2023b, 2025; Karim, 1981; Nowak, 1987). This research focuses on the Mah Meri of Kampung Sungai Bumbun in Carey Island. Historically, their ancestors' livelihood was closely tied to resources from the sea and mangrove forests.

The Mah Meri performs the main jo'oh, their traditional music and dance, to propitiate and appease their *moyang* (ancestral spirits) during the annual '*Ari Moyang* (Ancestral Spirit Day), weddings, and festive ceremonies (Chan, 2010; 2023a, 2023b, 2025; Karim, 1981; Nowak, 1987) (Figure 2). The culture bearers of Kampung Sungai Bumbun are also the village's main musicians, singers, dancers, weavers, and woodcarvers.

FIGURE 2. The *main jo'oh* (music and dance) ensemble performing during '*Ari Moyang* (10 March 2024) at Kampung Sungai Bumbun, Carey Island, Malaysia

The main jo'oh includes a repertoire of nine songs and two instrumental pieces. The music is performed by the main jo'oh ensemble, which features musical instruments such as the *jule* (violin), vocal, *banjeng* (strummed bamboo zither), *tungtung* (bamboo stamping tubes), *tawak* (knobbed gong), and *tambo* (double-headed drum) (Chan, 2010, 2023a, 2023b, 2025). The Mah Meri also use the main jo'oh to represent and assert their indigenous identity, when invited by government organizations, associations, and tourist agencies to perform for various cultural events (Chan, 2023a, 2023b).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent decades, there has been an uprise of literature on critical indigenous studies that challenge the representation of scholarly research on these communities especially those during the era of colonialism (Chilisa, 2020; Chin, 2007; Smith, 2012). These indigenous movements contest the authority and sense of privilege of early researchers that enabled them to label their perspectives on other cultures as absolute truths (Pirsiq, 1999). A series of decolonization movements has occurred among the indigenous people including the Maori of New Zealand; Kanaka Maoli, Hawaii; and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples of Australia on the education of their children (Museus et al., 2023). Rather than creating knowledge based on a colonial epistemological framework, Walker (2003) suggests for meaningful integration of ways of knowing within research protocols. Dei & Johal (2011) reminds researchers that "no one body of knowledge can have superiority over another" (p. 3), asserting for balance of power between the researcher, culture bearer, and participants. Shor (2009) posits that the researcher should be clear of the connection between knowledge and power, aware of the origins of the knowledge, and how it can be integrated to create new epistemologies. While these Indigenous decolonizing methods advocate for equitable power sharing within collaborative teams, reflective research that offers deeper insight into how such methods unfold in practice remains scarce.

Applied ethnomusicologists face numerous challenges when working with Indigenous communities on music transmission projects, particularly in navigating cultural backgrounds, music education practices, and their own positionality relative to culture bearers and workshop participants (Pettan & Titon, 2015, 2019). Further complications include ethical concerns—such as preventing cultural appropriation and misrepresentation—as well as addressing generational gaps and shifting cultural interests among younger members (Bennett, 2023; Young & Brunk, 2012). Many applied ethnomusicologists have theorized the music sustainability approaches; however, there remains limited visibility and transparency regarding the strategies used to address issues and challenges.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) has been widely adopted in countries with strong multicultural or Indigenous education frameworks (Caingcoy, 2023; Gay, 2010; McKoy et al., 2023). It is most extensively implemented in the United States, where CRP originally emerged to address educational inequities among minoritized learners (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2010). The approach is also well established in Canada, particularly in First Nations and Inuit education and multicultural urban schooling (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001). In Australia and New Zealand, CRP is embedded within Indigenous and bicultural education priorities, including Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, and Māori pedagogical frameworks (Bishop, 2012; Morrison et al., 2019). In the United Kingdom, CRP has gained traction in urban, diverse classrooms and in arts-based education (Archer & Francis, 2007).

However, while CRP is firmly grounded in teaching practice, there is comparatively little scholarship on Culturally Responsive Methodology—that is, how cultural responsiveness can guide the design, conduct, and interpretation of research itself**.** Existing literature overwhelmingly centres on classroom pedagogy, leaving a gap in understanding of how culturally grounded, relational, and community-accountable principles can inform research processes. Culturally responsive methodology (CRM) extends the ideas of CRP into the research domain by emphasising collaborative knowledge production, respect for cultural protocols, relational ethics, and the co-construction of meaning with community partners rather than the extraction of data from them. This gap highlights the need for studies that apply CRM to research contexts, particularly in culturally rich fields such as community music, Indigenous arts, and ethnographic inquiry.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Applied Ethnomusicology emphasizes on a bottom-up approach, collaboration between culture bearers and researchers, as well as cultivating "ownership" of cultural products among the participants on their own cultural heritage (Araujo, 2008; Bendrups, 2015; Friere, 1998; Harrison, 2015, Pettan & Titon, 2015; Schippers, 2015; Tan, 2015). In Applied Ethnomusicology, researchers act as facilitators who respect and recognize the local resources, experiences, and expertise of the culture bearers and participants (Tan, 2019). Tan (2015) propounds that:

> for any cultural development project to be sustainable, communities must be empowered and gain confidence to take action in order to make changes in their lives. There is also a need to democratize and promote collaboration between researcher and the community so that the latter is engaged and feels a sense of ownership in the entire process for change
>
> (p. 111)

The Culturally Responsive Methodology (CRM) was developed to address traditional research methodologies that devalue and dehumanize the research participants. CRM encourages a research approach that respectful and reciprocative relationships are integral to human dignity and the research itself. CRM derives from a combination of critical theory and the Kaupapa Maori Theory (Berryman et al., 2013). Bishop's (2005) posits that the CRM allowed the Maori movement to reclaim their original cultural ways. Instead of exploiting and devaluing Maori knowledge and practices, it empowers Maori communities to take ownership and support the revival and preservation of all aspects of Maori culture. In CRM,

> … the culturally responsive researcher does not impose her research agenda on the community", She enters the community with an attitude of learning from the community how to be of service, being on site frequently and regularly to establish trust, and so on.
>
> (Berryman et al, 2008, p. 17)

CRM is situated within Indigenous decolonization theory as an applied, practice-oriented, and action-based extension of its principles. It provides researchers and community practitioners with a framework for challenging and transforming Western-centric research traditions in collaboration with Indigenous communities. CRM foregrounds Indigenous epistemologies and prioritizes the meaningful participation, agency, and decision-making power of Indigenous peoples throughout the entire research. Through CRM, researchers thread to balance Western-centric research practices and discourse, working instead to reposition knowledge within

Indigenous cultural frameworks (Berryman et al., 2013). It involves a collaborative approach between researcher and culture bearers in the reclamation and revitalization of Indigenous spirituality, worldviews, and cultural traditions as defined by Indigenous peoples themselves (Smith, 2012; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008).

Since CRM involves a dialogic relationship where knowledge is co-created, therefore not only is how knowledge is transmitted, but how it is co-created is important in CRM. In the Culturally Responsive Methodology, I identified six approaches: 1) Developing participant's sense of ownership of knowledge and creation 2) Empowering the sustainability of indigenous knowledge, language, culture, and heritage 3) Motivating interactive and dialogic pedagogy between researcher and culture bearers 4) Collaborative work, co-creation and co-learning between researcher and participants 5) Community involvement and support 6) Mutual respect, and humility between researcher and participants (Berryman et al., 2013).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

While Applied Ethnomusicology and Culturally Responsive Methodology (CRM) provide important guiding frameworks for research, ethnomusicologists inevitably encounter complex, "rhizoming" challenges that extend beyond theoretical prescriptions. These issues are often derived from the evolving political climate, socio-cultural issues, power imbalances, among the collaborative team. Working hand in hand with and culture bearers, the research team hoped to nurture a balanced and non-bias approach to musical heritage transmission.

Several challenges emerged: implementing a genuinely "bottom-up" approach; fostering a sense of "ownership" and interest in cultural heritage among children increasingly disconnected from the declining mangrove environment that once inspired Mah Meri songs; and translating place-based, lifelong learning into structured workshop formats. Further tensions stemmed from the research team's limited understanding of Indigenous enculturation processes and the difficulty of cultivating dialogic pedagogy between culture bearers and researchers—a challenge shaped by colonial residues that continue to subdue community expression.

Before examining these immediate issues, it is important to acknowledge the deeper historical conditions that necessitate the use of CRM in the first place. These conditions relate to broader processes of Indigenous decolonization, which developed in response to the policies imposed on the Orang Asli during early 20th-century British colonial rule. Following independence, elements of control and domination persisted in new forms through national government policies, creating a continued sense of neo-colonial influence (Endicott, 2016; Nicholas, 2000).

This section therefore begins by outlining the relevant government policies that contributed to the rise of Indigenous decolonization efforts— hence the rationale for using CRM in this study.

FROM COLONIALISM TO NEO-COLONIALISM

During the British colonial rule (1874–1957) in Malaysia, colonial administrators viewed the Orang Asli as weak and vulnerable, undermining their valuable ecological knowledge and skills in the rainforest and their worldviews of sustainability through a reciprocal relationship among humans, animals, and the supernatural. After Independence in 1957, these perceptions persisted and became embedded in neo-colonial state policies that constructed the Orang Asli as "backward"

and in need of development. Through the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA), state-driven programmes of development, modernization, and religious conversion were implemented with the aim of integrating the Orang Asli into mainstream society (Nicholas, 2000). Such "integration," however, is deliberately engineered to compel Orang Asli communities to conform to state norms, bureaucratic structures, and hegemonic values—encompassing participation in formal schooling, national language dominance, healthcare systems, fast-food culture, and salaried employment. Although these mechanisms appear to promote modernisation and enhance quality of life, they simultaneously require the abandonment of culture-based healing rituals, indigenous languages, customary food practices, subsistence economies, and indigenous governance systems (Nicholas, 2000).

NATIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

The implementation of "schooling" through the national education system of Malaysia has detached Orang Asli children from inheriting Indigenous knowledge and values that have been central to the community's survival for thousands of years. Among the most important Indigenous values are those that emphasize the sustainability of the earth through mutual respect among all forces of nature—values that modern societies urgently need to relearn. Modern educational models have been widely criticized for lacking inclusivity, cultural diversity, and epistemological pluralism (Abdul Razaq Ahmad et al., 2019; Biermann, 2011; Norwaliza Abdul Wahab, 2020). This disconnection often results in feelings of irrelevance among Orang Asli children and contributes to high dropout rates in national schools (Nicholas, 2000; Chan, 2023b). There is no incorporation of Orang Asli songs, dances, or oral traditions as resources for learning, nor are these forms meaningfully integrated into the teaching and learning of music in schools. Furthermore, some educators express concern that certain Orang Asli songs are associated with the supernatural and may be perceived as conflicting with the national religion, leading a conscious "forgetting" from the curriculum.

In national schools, Western music education relies heavily on music literacy, notation, individualized lesson schedules, and assessment-based progress, all of which aim to develop individual competency in performance. In contrast, Indigenous transmission methods are grounded in lifelong learning, where knowledge emerges through community relationships, experiential engagement, and hands-on participation. These methods validate experiential, embodied, oral, and spiritual learning**,** and knowledge is not transferred from a teacher to a student in a hierarchical manner. Instead, it emphasizes relational accountability**,** where knowledge is shared responsibly within networks of kinship, obligation, and respect (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). These epistemologies have not been meaningfully promoted in national schools, as many contemporary educators have internalized hegemonic models of education and have not recognized the value of traditional modes of learning—ironically, the very approaches through which they themselves were nurtured at home.

MODERNIZATION

As the hegemony of Western medicine began to dominate globally, the Mah Meri were encouraged to adopt modern healthcare systems. Consequently, much of their traditional healing practices—rooted in spiritual engagement with the supernatural world—were abandoned. The intrinsic communication between humans and the spiritual realm came to be dismissed as superstition and

primitive as scientific, empirical approaches took precedence. This shift has led to the gradual decline of rituals and music associated with Mah Meri healing ceremonies, including the songs, musical structures, and movements embedded within them (Karim, 1980; Nowak, 1987; Chan, 2023a)

Although Mah Meri musical heritage survives through performances staged for tourism, these expressions often serve external interests, reducing their function, meaning, and aesthetics. Without meaningful cultural purpose, the internal motivation to sing, create, and transmit these traditions weakens. Moreover, the widespread normalization of popular music among the younger generation represents another layer of cultural hegemony, where external musical forms are internalized as natural, neutral, and superior. Decades of colonial and postcolonial influence have led some Orang Asli to absorb external values as normative (Gramsci, 1971).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In collaborating with the Mah Meri culture bearers to transmit their musical heritage to their children, we applied the methods guided in theories of Applied Ethnomusicology and CRM and self-monitored by PAR. In applying these guidelines, we encountered several questions.

1. What will inspire the young musicians to develop a sense of ownership over their musical heritage?
2. In what ways can the indigenous knowledge and values embedded in musical heritage be made relevant and meaningful to contemporary contexts?
3. How can dialogic pedagogy be enacted more progressively between the research team cultural bearers?

METHODOLOGY

In implementing CRM during a series of music heritage workshops with ten Mah Meri young musicians, the Participatory Action Research (PAR) was adopted to facilitate a continuous process of action, observation, reflection, and modification throughout the project (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Unlike conventional research that provides empirical data with statistics and evidence, PAR is a non-linear process of observation, reflection, action, and revision when combined with CRM, seldom produces neat or predictable findings. The PAR approach exposes the layered cultural, social, and pedagogical complexities that shape Indigenous heritage work. Because PAR engages participants in ongoing non-linear inquiry and decision-making, and CRM centres local epistemologies and lived realities (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995), the research process naturally surfaces tensions, contradictions, and emergent challenges. These are not methodological weaknesses but valuable insights aligned with Indigenous research principles that emphasise relationality, context, and community transformation (Smith, 2012). Therefore, the findings demonstrates the issues, challenges and evolving community dynamics rather than tidy, fixed outcomes.

This paper highlights how the collaborative team, comprising the research team and culture bearers, integrated guidelines in Applied Ethnomusicology and the CRM to navigate six music heritage workshops we conducted in 2024. Prior to this, two other music heritage workshops of

the same duration had been conducted in 2022 and 2023. The research team collaborated with the culture bearers from the main jo'oh ensemble of Tompoq Topoh on this project including Maznah Unyan, Julida Uji and Gali Adam. Maznah Unyan is the leader and lead singer of the main jo'oh music ensemble. Julida Uju supports the rhythm played by accompanying the main jo'oh music, while Gali Adam plays the *jule* (violin) in the ensemble.

FIGURE 3. Young musicians playing the *tungtung* in the front row performed together with culture bearers during '*Ari Moyang* (20 March 2023) in Kampung Sungai Bumbun, Carey Island, Selangor (Photo by Clare Chan, 2023)

We used the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach to monitor our activities in which we recorded and reflected upon our actions through written documentation throughout each workshop. The musical heritage workshops were conducted with 10 Mah Meri young musicians in Kampung Sungai Bumbun, Carey Island in 2024 (Figure 3). The workshops were conducted between February and March 2024 and led towards the participants' performance in their annual '*Ari Moyang* (Ancestral Spirit Day) on 10th March 2024. The workshops were held in the *Pusat Kraf Orang Asli Sungai Bumbun* Orang Asli Sungai Bumbun Craft Center located in the village. The workshop length ranged from morning sessions from 10:00 a.m.–1:00 p.m. and sometimes continued into afternoon sessions from 2:00 p.m.–5:00 p.m.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

The Participatory Action Research (PAR) which involves action, observation, reflection, and modifications was utilized to monitor our transmission approaches (Kindon et al., 2010; Kirshner & Kamberelis, 2021; McIntyre, 2008). In discussing our responses, we expose ourselves to what Bendrup (2015) terms as "vulnerabilities" however not as in:

> corollary for weakness or deficit, but as a state of being where our personal and professional selves are revealed and made permeable…the purpose is not to indulge in the researcher's experience of vulnerability, but to pragmatically acknowledge that vulnerabilities and uncertainties exists, and practical measures can be taken to overcome the barriers caused by these vulnerabilities.
>
> (Bendrups, 2015, p. 72)

While each workshop activity was initially planned, we revised the contents in response to the issues that arose during each subsequent workshop. Eventually the contents for six weeks workshops were:

1. Learning "Song of Jaboi" through rote learning, role-play, and mask making.
2. Describing musical instruments, *moyang* (ancestral spirits) and flora and fauna.
3. Understanding about the benefits of mangrove forests and environmental issues.
4. Learning to play the bass, guitar and drum set for contemporary "Song of Jaboi".
5. Learning how to transmit knowledge of main jo'oh to outsiders.
6. Creating the dance to the contemporized version of "Song of Jaboi".

Workshops from Week four to six are not discussed in this paper. In this paper, we critically reflect on our conscious actions in mobilizing CRM using PAR. We framed our issues and responses based using the three of the six categories outlined by Berryman et al. (2013) on CRM. We monitored our actions throughout the workshops using the 1) action 2) observation 3) reflection, and 4) modification processes from the PAR approach. In order to enhance clarity of our PAR action processes, adverbs such as "on observation", "upon reflection", "implemented", "explored", "responded to" were used to facilitate the identification of when these processes were utilized.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Although many issues and challenges occurred simultaneously, each rooted in past sources and "rhizoming" into more complicated issues, we frame them under CRM guidelines to enable a more logical understanding of the problems encountered. In the following section, we will use the word "young musicians" to refer to the Orang Asli children participants of our music heritage workshops.

DEVELOPING PARTICIPANTS' SENSE OF OWNERSHIP OF THEIR CULTURAL CREATIONS

One of the important approaches in CRM is empowering the young musicians to create, compose or perform because they are genuinely interested in the subject. Although the subject transmitted is originally based on the culture bearer and researcher's initial intention to sustain cultural heritage, the young musicians should also be inspired by the same interest. Cultivating the interest of the participants and empowering ownership of changes in the communities are always a challenge for the "etic" researchers. The researchers needed to balance their aims, the culture bearers' aspirations, and the workshop participant's current interest. One of the recurring challenges faced by the research team was how to nurture young musicians' interest in their own musical heritage and encourage them to renew it through spontaneous improvisation, as their elders once did. This raises critical questions: How can young musicians meaningfully engage with their ancestral musical heritage when that music was inspired by flora and fauna that have since

declined in their surrounding environment? Furthermore, how can their current musical experiences—shaped primarily by radio, the Internet, and social media—be meaningfully connected to these ancestral songs

Before discussing the workshop content, a brief background of Mah Meri indigenous cultural traditions is necessary. The Mah Meri have a large pantheon of *moyang* (ancestral spirits) within their belief system, which appear prominently in their folktales, songs, and dances. These *moyang* are derived from the flora and fauna of the mangrove and rainforest environments that once surrounded the community (Karim, 1980; Chan, 2010, 2023a, 2025). Among the *moyang* associated with their songs are *moyang* Jaboi (Figure 4) in the "Song of Jaboi," *moyang* Tok Naning in the "Song of Tok Naning," *moyang* Lang Kuit (flying fox) in the "Song of Kuwang Kuit," and *moyang* Pera Gunting (bird) in the "Song of Pera Gunting."

FIGURE 4. Jaboi as imagined and carved by Awas Sayur, veteran Mah Meri woodcarver.

Based on the culture bearer's suggestion, we began the music workshops by engaging the young musicians in learning to sing the "Song of Jaboi", the Mah Meri's signature song. In keeping with the oral tradition of learning, the song text was transmitted through singing and listening. Reflecting on how the workshop could also be leveraged to support the practice of writing—a modern foundational skill—we then asked the young musicians to write out the song texts of the "Song of Jaboi." During this activity, we observed that most of the younger musicians struggled to write the song text in the Mah Meri language. In addition to Mah Meri lacking a written language, the younger musicians experienced difficulty representing the language phonetically. Closer observation revealed that, although the young musicians attended school, some had not developed basic reading and writing skills. In response, the research team consulted Maznah Unyan regarding the children's schooling and learned that several of the young musicians were experiencing family-related challenges, which may have contributed to limited educational support and, consequently, difficulties in literacy development. This is one example of how one issue rhizomes from issues rooted in other causes, which consequently affects motivation toward other activities. Upon reflection, we recognized our limitations in handling family issues related to

schooling and literacy, which was not in our area of expertise. Consequently, our action was to focus on inspiring participants to read and write through the music heritage workshops.

On taking action, we decided to deepen the young musician's understanding of "Song of Jaboi". Through storytelling, Maznah Unyan brought Jaboi vividly to life, enhancing students' understanding of traditional folklore and the unique symbolism within the song. By introducing them to Jaboi—a mystical ancestral spirit with an inverted or upside down or inverted nose who exhibits unusual behaviors like walking backward and hiding under a *pallas* tree when it rains—the young musicians gained insight in their cultural beliefs and character archetypes. Jaboi's fear of water dripping into its nose adds a whimsical, yet meaningful layer to the narrative, as it reflects local humor tied to folklore (Chan, 2023). Next, to help each young musician develop a sense of "ownership" of Jaboi, we invited them to embody the character by acting out their individual interpretations and imaginations of Jaboi. We observed that while the young musicians could imitate stylized actions of the mythical Moyang Jaboi based on the story, they struggled to create their personal versions of Jaboi. Upon reflection, we recognized that imaginative enactment was a more challenging task; therefore, we revised our approach and asked the participants to draw their own mask designs of Jaboi instead. In hindsight, we may have erred by encouraging the participants to recall movements from their favourite cartoon series. This prompted them to enthusiastically incorporate characters from Japanese anime—such as Sikma, Saitama, Titan, Naruto, and Sasuke—into their mask designs (Figure 5). In the subsequent activity, the participants acted out their own interpretations of Jaboi, resulting in what might be described as an "anime-ized" version of the character. Only one participant remained closely connected to Carey Island, naming his mask "Jaboi of Carey Island". Although I was initially sceptical of this divergence, I gradually came to understand that such reinterpretations exemplify the very processes through which creative continuity unfolds within the Mah Meri tradition—where the ancestors have always been dynamic, adaptive, and eclectic.

FIGURE 5. Anime-nized interpretations of Jaboi character

Although we welcomed contemporary ideas into Mah Meri culture during our PAR reflections, we realized that the young musicians had limited knowledge and appreciation of indigenous cosmology, myths, and their natural environment. For subsequent workshops, we modified our planned content by creating games and activities that incorporated knowledge about their natural environment with contemporary national and global issues.

ENCOURAGING INTEREST IN INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

Our second workshop responded to the first workshops which revealed the participants lack interest and knowledge about their cultural heritage. The Mah Meri children and teenagers have little knowledge about how their traditional mangrove territories were converted in oil-palm estates in the early 1900s by the British nor are they aware of an impending discussion on how "the Malaysian government is pressing ahead with plans for massive greenfield terminal on Carey Island in Port Klang, the world's 12th largest container port" (Hand, 2023). McCoy et al. (2017) emphasized on the importance in acknowledging indigenous cosmologies, historical and current contexts of colonization in education in addressing land education in settler colonial territories.

FIGURE 6. Maznah Unyan assessing her group's "mix and match" game

In this second workshop, action was taken to transmit knowledge about mangrove forests, the traditional ecology of the Mah Meri, through lectures, games and videos. The participants also played games to understand the function and benefits of the mangrove forests. In the first game, one participant acted as a single mangrove tree while the other participants were sea creatures and plants, as well as non-biodegradable waste that was washed to shore. Known for small hurricanes,

the Mah Meri's ancestral spirit, *moyang puting beliung* (hurricane spirit) arrived and washed all the participants to the shore. Only one mangrove tree was able to prevent some destruction. In the ensuing games, the mangrove trees were increased by more participants who were able to hinder non desirable components from destroying the natural ecology of Carey Island. We observed that the participants enjoyed the game and imitated the movement of *ketab* crabs, *ketab gading* mud lobsters and *ka tembakul* mudskippers that were swept from the sea. It was effective in manifesting the importance of sustainability of the mangrove forests in the natural environment.

The second activity in the workshop was aimed at enhancing the participants knowledge of the connection between the flora and fauna of the mangrove forests with the Mah Meri woodcarvings of *moyang* ancestral spirits. The participants were excited at playing the mix and match competition where they had to pair the two categories up. To encourage the culture bearer's participation, Maznah Unyan judged whether the participants match was correct (Figure 6). To our surprise, we observed that the older participants were able to match them quite accurately. However, one workshop was not enough to stimulate interest in learning as the participants quickly returned to their video games during workshop intervals.

Upon reflection, we believe it is integral to inspire the children to connect with their elders to learn about their indigenous values, cosmology, myths, and cultural heritage. The schools that their children attend do not promote Mah Meri cultural heritage but encourage learning Malay dances such as *joget, inang* and *zapin* (Maznah Unyan, personal communication, 22 July 2024), The animistic worldview and indigenous cosmology of the Mah Meri are also not utilized as educational materials in school. Additionally, the local natural mangrove and sea environment on Carey Island is not explored as live examples of biodiversity. Reflecting on this, we believe it is essential for Mah Meri participants to internalize their indigenous cultural heritage because understanding their worldviews helps them understand their *jati diri* (identity). Knowledge and evidence embedded in myths, stories, music, and dances connected to the land are legal tools that can protect their land from being stripped away (Bah Tony Williams, personal communication, 10 March 2024). Additionally, learning about their heritage connects younger generations with their elders, fostering respect and continuity of cultural practices and wisdom.

Education that provides a broader understanding of their worldviews in the context of other religious systems can help develop pride in the uniqueness of their beliefs and cultural practices, addressing discrimination and stereotypes. We acknowledge that these aims come from the research team at this point in time. We believe the culture bearers share the same perspective, although they may not be able to voice it formally. We will continue to discuss this with the culture bearers for further actions.

MOBILIZING DIALOGIC PEDAGOGY BETWEEN RESEARCHER AND CULTURE BEARERS

In 2022 and 2023, the research team comprised myself alone; in 2024, I was joined by a co-researcher. Primary challenges in the 2022–2023 workshops was to manage the young musicians' points of musical entry and exit, as the songs were traditionally performed within ritual contexts that did not require fixed beginnings or endings. Singers joined and exited the music within their own discretion. By asking the children to count beats between verses and choruses to cue musical entries and exits, we introduced a new performance practice based on western models. In the 2022 workshops, I taught the participants using the western approach to counting beats before entry. The participant leader would stamp their pair of bamboo stamping tubes twice before the rest would join in. The exit was signaled by the *tawak* player who doubled his strikes prior to the

ending. This proved only effective when the noise level was low during the festival and the participants were "performing" rather than playing for the main jo'oh *d*ances during festivals. During the young musicians first live performance as an ensemble in 2022, I asked them to perform the two songs in a "staged" style (Figure 7). Upon reflection, we had introduced "staged performance", an approach that derived from western classical music approach. Although Applied Ethnomusicology does not encourage top-down ideas, the culture bearers did not show resistance toward this action. I also did not know how to balance our power as an academician with the culture bearers.

In the 2023 workshops, I focused on involving culture bearers in addressing musical issues, such as the young musicians' tendency to speed up during the "Song of Kuwang Kuit." We aimed to balance power dynamics between researchers and culture bearers by encouraging Maznah Unyan to discuss the song's meaning with the participants. Maznah Unyan explained that the song reflects the playful gliding of a flying fox and emphasized that it should be sung slowly, with a lyrical quality. She also corrected the participants' pronunciation of Mah Meri words, like "*ka*" (fish), which has been replaced by the word "*ikan*" in Malay. For the "Song of Tok Naning," Maznah Unyan highlighted the importance of a "wavy" melodic ending on the syllables "*huk*" and "*hop*" of the song.

FIGURE 7. Staged performance during '*Ari Moyang* in 2022 (Photo by Clare Chan, 2022)

To address the tendency for the participants to accelerate in speed while playing the *tungtung*, Maznah Unyan and Julida Uju, played the *tungtung* alongside the children. Additionally, Gali Adam, the *jule* player, taught the children to use his introductory and concluding melodic motives as cues the *jule* for entering and exiting the performance. During the *'Ari Moyang* ceremony on March 20, 2023, participants performed alongside the culture bearers. After the young musicians began to internalize the aesthetic qualities of each song, they were able to control

the speed of the *tungtung*. This interaction between participants and elders was crucial for transferring musical aesthetics and ensuring the sustainability of our musical heritage.

After two years of workshops, the young musicians became aware of these entry and exit issues. We felt that it was time that we empowered them into "ownership" of their own decision making by determining how they could enter and exit together. Initially, we helped them get coordinated but when they forgot how to enter and exit again, an older young musician suggested another signal for ending. The participants soon adopted their older young musician's counting signals. During '*Ari Moyang* however, when the participants sang together with the elder musicians, they re-adjusted to the elder's style of playing, musical aura, aesthetics, and energy.

At this point, it seemed like the young musicians were able to adjust, adapt and merge with the performance flow depending on context. They did not continue to use the method that the research team had taught them but they understood its logic in the performance context. Therefore, we believe that musical sustainability is not just about singing, it is about an intangible and unexplainable aura that is exuded from a community living in specific isolated locations. As Quest Rapuara (1992) states—"culture is what holds the community together … it expresses our values towards land and time, and our attitudes towards work and play, good and evil, reward and punishment (p. 7). Therefore, keeping the workshops participants close to the veteran musicians was crucial in synergizing their spirits, energy, and musical aesthetics

Over the course of three years of workshops, the researchers noticed that the Mah Meri culture bearers and participants did not adhere to any fixed ways for solving musical problems. Their methods were spontaneous and flexible. Therefore, our primary concern reverted not toward sticking to one solution but rather ensuring that the children recognized the issues and developed various strategies to address musical challenges.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we argue that developing a sense of ownership and sustaining Indigenous knowledge requires moving beyond narrowly defined, place-based notions of locality toward an understanding of locality as relational, mediated, and socially produced. Drawing on Appadurai's (1996) concept of deterritorialization, locality is understood not as a fixed physical environment but as a dynamic space shaped by circulation, imagination, and everyday cultural practice. Within the CRM, these mediated and virtual environments—such as digital games, anime, and popular visual cultures—are recognized as integral to the lived realities of young musicians and therefore constitute legitimate sites of engagement, learning, and knowledge production. From a CRM perspective, sustaining Indigenous musical heritage requires attentiveness to the cultural frames of reference through which young musicians make meaning. When provided opportunities to explore identity through music, young musicians do not simply reproduce inherited forms but actively reinterpret them in ways that resonate with their contemporary worlds. During our workshops, participants drew on their immersion in video games to identify with the character of *moyang* Jaboi. Although Maznah Unyan initially depicted the character according to established narrative conventions, the young musicians reimagined him in an anime-inspired form. This act of reinterpretation reflects a culturally responsive engagement with heritage, in which ancestral figures are translated into visual and narrative idioms that are meaningful to the participants.

Theoretically, this process aligns with decolonial and Indigenous epistemological frameworks that conceptualise knowledge as relational, embodied, and emergent rather than fixed and transmissive (Smith, 2012; Ingold, 2011). The anime-inspired reimagining of *moyang* Jaboi does not signal a rupture from Indigenous tradition; rather, it demonstrates epistemic agency and identity negotiation within a deterritorialized locality (Appadurai, 1996). Within a CRM framework, such creative reinterpretations are understood as evidence of meaningful engagement and cultural continuity, highlighting how Indigenous knowledge can be sustained through responsiveness to youth-led, mediated, and relational modes of knowing.

Second, while culture bearers may articulate their conscious and formalized understandings of Indigenous pedagogy, and the research team may negotiate these alongside Western educational frameworks and contemporary observations of how young musicians learn, this process of negotiation constitutes the emergence of a new pedagogical formation. Grounded in CRM, this pedagogy is collaborative, dialogic, and inclusive of young musicians' creative responses. Rather than attempting to reproduce idealized or insufficiently theorized notions of Indigenous epistemologies, meaningful transmission in this context is achieved through co-created and reciprocal learning among researchers, culture bearers, and young musician participants. Ultimately, this article demonstrates that sustaining musical heritage requires not only methodological flexibility but also shared agency, in which knowledge transmission emerges through relationships, negotiation, and the lived realities of the community.

We argue that although the CRM is a valuable framework, incorporating indigenous knowledge, music transmission, and dialogic pedagogy into music heritage transmission workshops requires strategies that make it meaningful and relevant for today's village children and teenage participants. In addition, achieving a balanced power dynamic between researchers and culture bearers requires dedication and commitment from both sides to fulfil each's aspiration for the community. The effects of CRM are difficult to quantify objectively, yet they become apparent in unexpected ways as we pursue musical growth through ongoing involvement with the community. In the end, we believe that shared agency fosters growth for everyone involved, and enjoying this journey makes advocacy more meaningful.

We are beginning to see that sustainability is less about "preserving" traditional music per se and more about fostering collaboration among different groups of musicians from the country. Our workshops created opportunities for musicians from various backgrounds to engage, which encouraged Mah Meri youth to develop their own interpretations. The aim toward sustainability in our workshops has led "shared agency"— a celebration of the synergy between researchers, cultural bearers, and participants, leading to innovative musical concepts. Through exploring CRM, I discovered a form of "rhizomatic" pedagogy, in which learning unfolds unpredictably, multidirectional, and in response to digital worlds, everyday life, intergenerational differences, and my presence—allowing heritage transmission to emerge through ongoing negotiation and shared agency.

DECLARATIONS

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CONSENT TO PUBLISH

All authors of this publication reviewed and approved the final manuscript, and each provided explicit consent for submission. Furthermore, the authors confirm that appropriate permissions were obtained from the relevant authorities or institutional representatives at the organizations where the research was conducted, in accordance with institutional, cultural, and community protocols, prior to submission of this work for publication.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

All participants were thoroughly informed about the objectives and scope of the study, the research procedures involved, as well as any potential risks and anticipated benefits of their participation. This information was conveyed both verbally and in writing, using language and communication styles appropriate to the participants' cultural and linguistic context, to ensure full comprehension. Adequate time was provided for participants to consider their involvement and to raise any questions. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the commencement of data collection, affirming their voluntary participation and understanding of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty or consequence.

ETHICS STATEMENT AND INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent was obtained from the parents or legal guardians of all participants involved in this study. Prior to participation, the purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and confidentiality measures of the research were clearly explained in a language and manner appropriate to the community context. Parents and guardians were given the opportunity to ask questions and were informed of their right to withdraw their child from the study at any time without consequence. Community leaders and elders were actively consulted to ensure the research was conducted in a culturally respectful and contextually appropriate manner. Study was carried out through a longstanding relationship of over two decades of ethnographic engagement with the community and in close collaboration with culture bearers.

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